DEAR FIELD STAFF COLLEAGUES,

An enthusiastic, vocal and articulate group of over 90 polar field staff met in Iceland for the Polar Field Staff Conference from 1-4 October this year.

This biennial event, co-organised by IAATO and our sister association in the north, AECO (the Association for Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators) brings together expedition leaders, guides and operation managers to share experiences, knowledge and ideas to further our missions of safe, environmentally responsible travel in Polar regions.

The AECO and IAATO secretariats agreed that every participant showed a high level of professionalism and the utmost respect for our shared missions.

Field staff are on the front line of the polar tourism industry, and are developing initiatives in the field that are thought-provoking and inspiring.

The Polar Field Staff Conference is based on sharing and trust to facilitate candid and valuable discussions. Please do keep communicating with each other, your companies and with both AECO and IAATO, so we can all keep improving the way we interact with the greatest wildernesses on Earth.

Damon Stanwell-Smith
Executive Director, IAATO
The theme this year was *Evolution and New Challenges in the Polar Tourism Industry*. The Agenda included workshops, industry and stakeholder updates, presentations, case studies and plenty of discussion time to make the most of having so many experienced people from the industry under one roof. It was an excellent opportunity to talk about the hot topics facing all of us now and in the future.

Sessions included:

**Industry updates**

To set the scene of the conference, delegates were updated on new operational developments, projects and initiatives at both poles, from Svalbard and Greenland to South Georgia and the Ross Sea.

**Developments in Technology, Activities and Scale**

This session considered the implications of new activities and tools such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), Remotely Operated Vehicles (ROVs) and submersibles (HOVs).

Larger cruise vessel operations were also considered in light of the recent traverse of the North-West Passage.

The issue of carbon footprint was raised prompting delegates to share their experiences of using electric zodiacs. They also commented on the value of expedition staff being involved in program development to enhance safety and quality.

Staff were reminded that a special section on etiquette for vessel based helicopter operations has been added to IAATO’s
document on ATCM Guidelines for the Operation of Aircraft in Antarctica.

Managing Growth

All of us are aware that the demand to visit the polar regions continues to grow and that expedition ships are being built and delivered to meet it. To set the scene, the Iceland Tourism Research Centre gave an interesting and thought-provoking overview of how Iceland is managing rapid tourism growth. In the lively discussions afterwards, there were many practical suggestions for managing growth, including ideas for taking the pressure off special landing sites and managing client expectations, which should start at the marketing level.

Managing when and how often landings could occur was debated. It was agreed that more communication and cooperation between vessels was required, particularly in the Arctic where non-AECO member vessels also operate. It was felt that booking systems for sites need improvement; IAATO noted that their Live Ship Scheduler is under development. There was a suggestion that the South Georgia Government should clean up more historic sites to make them suitable for visits.

There was an overall agreement that the culture of expedition cruising needed to adapt in order to embrace any changes necessary to effectively manage tourism growth. This was not only in reference to field operations, but also to the communications shared with clients and potential visitors. There was particular emphasis on sensitively interacting with local Arctic communities. Delegates noted the importance of adequate and relevant staff training to meet the demands of expected growth.
Guideline Implementation and Field Staff Responsibilities

This session produced many useful suggestions and provided valuable insights on how field staff can educate themselves to implement guidelines more effectively. They were also asked to share what they expected from operators to help with this.

Other suggestions included, but weren’t limited to:

- A mentoring system to pass on historical and expert knowledge between seasoned and new staff;
- More use of AECO and IAATO websites to share useful resources;
- More updates from regulators and governments;
- Continued Field Staff Conferences;
- “If you see something, say something”. Improved reporting of possible violations to IAATO and AECO.
- More pre-departure information for guests;
- Ensure all staff know why ‘the rules’ exist that can also be passed onto guests for more effective implementation;
- Ensure guests and crew receive necessary information, understand it and be aware of their responsibility to visit the polar regions responsibly;
- Explore new ways and use different mediums to communicate this information.
- Employ good interpreters;
- Clear lines of communication between Head Office and field.
staff about the importance of IAATO, AECO values and guidelines;

- Send marketing staff on trips or to operational meetings to increase understanding of field operations;
- Field staff should be encouraged to get involved in product/programme development to improve the success of delivery in the field;
- Care in using social media – staff, passengers and crew should understand how content can be taken out of context;
- Not overselling expectations to guests; make sure marketing materials are in line with AECO/IAATO values;
- Operators are willing to invest more resources into relevant field staff training;
- More communication between operators and field staff about the type of training required;
- Provide guidelines on appropriate qualifications for polar guides;
- Structure turnaround times/days to encourage more time for briefing staff, crew, guests;
- Help staff create more Ambassadors;

**CITIZEN SCIENCE AND CREATING ANTARCTIC AMBASSADORS – HOW TOURISM CONTRIBUTES TOWARDS THE KNOWLEDGE AND PROTECTION OF OUR POLAR REGIONS**

Citizen science – inviting guests to participate in research projects – is becoming increasingly popular amongst IAATO and AECO members. Engaging people in research that generates interest, exhilaration and quality science is a winning combination and contributes to our vision of creating ambassadors for the polar regions. When science projects are replicated by operators across the industries, results can potentially give us a greater overall picture of what is happening in the polar regions while demonstrating the positive role of tourism in these areas.

Scientists and field staff gave overviews of successful ongoing and exciting new projects. Speakers advised the importance of choosing projects carefully to maximise success in producing relevant, respected science and guest engagement. For example, nominating one person on the vessel/in the field to coordinate the activity will achieve best results; if working with scientists from outside your company, check how data collected from the project will be released into the public domain.

For Antarctic operations, there is a list of established projects in the IAATO Field Operations Manual that require help from operators, but there is a feeling that more coordination is needed to assist operators interested in running citizen science projects and ensure that the projects are replicated correctly. IAATO is looking into this and is aware that a small group of field staff have formed a not-for-profit collective to improve project coordination.
Antarctic Tourism Experience Project | Bucknell University

Does polar travel create ambassadors?

The Antarctic Travel Experience Project, coordinated by Bucknell University, USA, seeks to understand more about who travels to Antarctica, their motivations, and the lasting impacts of this travel experience. In particular they are investigating what it means to become an ‘Antarctic Ambassador’, the results of which could add validity to IAATO’s vision of creating “a corps of Ambassadors for the continued protection of Antarctica”, adding value to the role of IAATO and polar tourism generally within the Antarctic community and beyond.

The project was well received by IAATO members at their annual meeting in 2017. Following a successful pilot phase, vessels operating out of Ushuaia have been requested to help by offering a simple survey to their guests. Please ask your company if your vessel is taking part. You can also pick up survey packs at the Tourist Information Centre in Ushuaia (near the pier).

Association of Responsible Krill Harvesting Companies (ARK)

There is a degree of overlap between the tourism and fishery industries, particularly in the Antarctic Peninsula region, so Cilia Holmes, from ARK, was invited to give an overview of their operations, the krill fishery and answer inevitable questions. A key question from the audience was the issue of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) basing its allowable catch quota on krill biomass survey data from 2000. The good news is that CCAMLR members have now agreed to undertake a new krill biomass survey that
will lead to an updated stock assessment to better inform the management of the krill fishery in Antarctic waters.

Look out for the latest news about CCAMLR and Marine Protected areas in a future issue of the IAATO Field Staff Newsletter.

If you have questions about the fishing industry or see something in the field you are unsure about, please get in touch (alynnes@iaato.org).

**IAATO / AECO PROJECTS**

**Promoting Best Practice and Conservation**
The Polar Field Staff Conference was an ideal opportunity to ask field staff for their input on current projects being developed by IAATO and AECO to strengthen and safeguard people, the environment and industry. These included:

- **O-VRAT – Off-Vessel Risk Assessment Tool**
  AECO has been granted funding from the Svalbard Environmental Protection Fund to develop an off-vessel risk assessment tool (O-VRAT). The tool will combine risk analysis with site vulnerability assessment to help Expedition Leaders assess and mitigate risks associated with off-vessel activities.

  Following a presentation by AECO Executive Director, Frigg Jorgensen, about the tool, field staff were asked to consider key factors that should be measured or included when considering risks associated with popular activities such as landings, hiking, zodiac cruising etc. Comments were collated and are being used for further tool development.

- **Arctic Youth Programs**
  Following a fascinating introduction to set the scene about cultural interaction by the Secretary General of the West Nordic Council, Inga Dora Gudmundsdottir Markussen, field staff contributed their thoughts and experiences about the values and activities that tour operators should consider when developing an Arctic Youth Program.

- **A Systematic Conservation Plan for the Antarctic Peninsula**
  IAATO Executive Director, Dr Damon Stanwell-Smith, gave an overview about IAATO’s work with the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) to develop a Systematic Conservation Plan for the Antarctic Peninsula. Using evidence based scientific information, the goal is to protect the environment by making informed, real-world conservation decisions. It’s is valuable in areas where there are multiple stakeholders. For more information see the paper submitted by [IAATO and SCAR at the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (IP166)].
Special IAATO Field Operations Committee Meeting

The IAATO Field Operations Committee took advantage of being in Iceland to hold a gathering to discuss the season ahead and catch up on projects in development.

Any questions?

IAATO – Amanda Lynnes, alynnes@iaato.org

AECO – Edda Falk, edda@ae.co.no

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Thank you for making the 2017 Polar Field Staff Conference such a success.

See you in 2019 for the next one!

Catch up and join the conversation on Twitter - #PolarGuides